



Mark Strand
Peering Into Nothingness

Third Saturday Poesy Café
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Presenter: Tom Corrado

Why Mark Strand?

The lawyer for my first divorce - a woman - asked if the photo on the back of the book I was reading - Mark Strand's *The Weather of Words* - was of me. I must admit, it *is* a very cool photo, and her mistake made Mark Strand all that more interesting to me! But *why* Mark Strand? Well, I like his choice in eyewear. I like his look. Stylishly cerebral. I like the fact that he, like Ashbery, wanted to be a painter. I like that he's a collagist, with a book of his artwork coming out next year. I like that at 77, he took a chance, revamped his life, found love, retired from Columbia, published a new collection, *Almost Invisible*, began yet another hiatus from writing poetry, and left New York for Madrid. And, of course, I like the way he works his words. So there you have it! I like the man and his poetry! He can be a prankster, a court jester, an existential joker, a satirist, a parodist who underscores his seriousness with humor, who uses words as whoopee cushions, as hand buzzers, to give readers a little jolt as in the first stanza of *Eating Poetry* when he writes *Ink runs from the corners of my mouth. / There is no happiness like mine. / I have been eating poetry* or when he begins his brief essay on *Narrative Poetry* with *Yesterday at the supermarket, I overheard a man and a woman discussing narrative poetry*. For all his deadpanning, however, he's never far from his recurring themes of absence, negation, vacancy, disintegration, emptiness, hopelessness, and death - all couched in a surreal, Beckettian landscape. Like all serious poets, he reveres words, choosing them carefully, using them sparingly to construct clean, simple, straightforward lines that possess an eerie quality of the inevitable as they move effortlessly between the commonplace and the sublime, addressing the universal not through the particular but through the universal.

Life

Born in Summerside, Prince Edward Island, Canada, in 1934, Mark Strand spent much of his childhood and adolescence in Halifax, Montreal, New York, Philadelphia, Peru, Cleveland, Columbia, and Mexico. Upon graduating from Antioch College with a B.A. in 1957, he went to Yale to study painting for two years with Joseph Albers, earning a B.F.A. in 1959. Turning from painting to poetry *wasn't a conscious thing*, he says. *I woke up and found that that's what I was doing. I don't think these kinds of lifetime obsessions are arrived at rationally*. After spending 1960-61 in Italy on a Fulbright, studying nineteenth-century Italian poetry, Strand attended the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop for a year, earning an M.A. in 1962, and then taught there until 1965, when he went to Brazil. He married Antonia Ratensky in 1961, divorced her in 1973, and married Julia Garretson in 1974. Strand has two children: a daughter, Jessica, from his first marriage, and a son, Thomas, from his second. In 1966, he and his wife and daughter moved to New York City. He taught at Mt. Holyoke College in 1967

and at Brooklyn College from 1970-72, then held visiting professorships at various places, among them Columbia, the University of Virginia, Yale, and Harvard. In 1981 he accepted a full-time position at the University of Utah, where he remained until 1993, at which time he became Elliott Coleman Professor of Poetry at Johns Hopkins. In 1997, he left Johns Hopkins to accept the Andrew MacLeish Distinguished Service Professorship of Social Thought at the University of Chicago. In 2005, Strand began teaching literature and creative writing at Columbia, retiring in 2012, and moving to Madrid.

[Addition: November 29, 2014: Mark Strand died on November 29, 2014. He was 80.]

Selected Books

Poetry

1964: *Sleeping with One Eye Open*
1968: *Reasons for Moving*
1970: *Darker*
1973: *The Story of Our Lives*
1973: *The Sargentville Notebook*
1978: *Elegy for My Father*
1978: *The Late Hour*
1980: *Selected Poems*
1990: *The Continuous Life*
1990: *New Poems*
1991: *The Monument*
1993: *Dark Harbor*
1998: *Blizzard of One* (Pulitzer Prize, 1999)
1999: *Chicken, Shadow, Moon & More*
1999: *89 Clouds*
2006: *Man and Camel*
2007: *New Selected Poems*
2012: *Almost Invisible*

Prose

1978: *The Monument*
1985: *Mr. and Mrs. Baby*
2000: *The Weather of Words: Poetic Invention*

Translations

1973: *The Owl's Insomnia* (Poems by Rafael Alberti)
1986: *Traveling in the Family* (Poems by Carlos Drummond de Andrade)

Other

1969: *The Contemporary American Poets*
1983: *Art of the Real*
1987: *William Bailey*
1992: *The Best American Poetry 1991*
1993: *Edward Hopper*

Awards

1960-1961: Fulbright Fellowship
1974: Edgar Allen Poe Award (Academy of American Poets)
1975: Guggenheim Fellowship
1977: National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship
1979: Academy of American Poets Fellowship
1986: National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship
1987: MacArthur Fellowship
1990-1991: Poet Laureate of the United States
1992: Bobbitt Prize for Poetry
1993: Bollingen Prize
1999: Pulitzer Prize (*Blizzard of One*)
2004: Wallace Stevens Award
2009: Gold Medal in Poetry (American Academy of Arts and Letters)

Comments

His:

The elements I require in order to be able to write are a place, a desk, a familiar room. I need some of my books there. I need quiet. That's about it.

I sometimes write in a less tranquil spot, such as on a train, but usually only prose, because it's less embarrassing. Who would understand a man of my age writing reams of poetry on a train, if they looked over my shoulder? I would be perceived as an overly emotional person.

[I can be inspired by] a word or a phrase or less than that. It doesn't have to be an idea but a sense of urgency about wanting to write. Pretty soon, you have a few words, and tomorrow comes, and by the end of the week, you have a few lines. The process of writing is discovering what you want to say and being sure you're

saying it in the best possible way you can.

When I'm going strong I can't wait to wake up and start. Without having something promising to work on, life would be pretty boring. With nothing to do, with nothing I like doing, why wake up in the morning?

What I like about writing is its incision, the fact that language is operating at its fullest. Words and poems exist on multiple levels. Poetry is a way of feeling deeply without being threatened. The other thing about poetry, why I like writing it, is I like making things up. I like writing a sentence or a few words and wondering where they're going to go. How can I create meaning, or the illusion of meaning, out of these words, words that have never been used in this particular order ever before and may not be used so again.

Whether I admit it or not, I write to participate in the delusion of my own immortality which is born every minute. And yet, I write to resist myself. I find resistance irresistible.

Ideally, it would be best to just write, to suppress the critical side of my nature and indulge the expressive. Perhaps. But I tend to think of the expressive part of me as rather tedious - never curious or responsive, but blind and self-serving. And because it has no power, let alone appetite, for self-scrutiny, it fits the reductive, dominating needs of the critical side of me. The more I think about this, the more I think that not writing is the best way to write.

A poem releases itself, secretes itself slowly, sometimes almost poisonously, into the mind of the reader . . . by rearranging the world in such a way that it appears new. It does it by using language that is slightly different from the way language is used in the workday world, so that you're forced to pay attention to it.

One essay that had great importance for me when I began to write was George Orwell's "Politics and the English Language." Reading it, I encountered for the first time a moral statement about good writing. True, Orwell was not considering the literary use of language, but language as an instrument for expressing thought. His point was that just as our English can become ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish, so the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts. The following rules, he explains, can be relied upon when the writer is in doubt about the effect of a word or phrase and his instinct fails him.

- 1. Never use a metaphor, simile or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.*
- 2. Never use a long word where a short one will do.*
- 3. If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.*

4. *Never use the passive where you can use the active.*
5. *Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word or jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.*
6. *Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous.*

These are of course very elementary rules and you could, as Orwell admits, keep all of them and still write bad English, though not as bad as you might have. But how far will they take us in the writing of a poem? And how much of that transaction I mentioned earlier is described by them? If following a simple set of rules guaranteed the success of a poem, poems would not be held in very high esteem, as, of course, they are. And far too many people would find it easy to write them, which, naturally, is not the case. For the poems that are of greatest value are those that inevitably, unselfconsciously break rules, poems whose urgency makes rules irrelevant.

In a poem, each word, being equally important, exists in absolute focus, having a weight it rarely achieves in fiction.

[When I read a poem] I look for astonishment. I look to be moved, to have my view of the world in which I live somewhat changed, enlarged. I want both to belong more strongly to it or more emphatically to it, and yet, to be able to see it, to have - well, it's almost a paradox to say this - a more compassionate distance.

The difference [between fiction, nonfiction, and poetry] is that the context of a poem is likely to be only the poet's voice - a voice speaking to no one in particular and unsupported by a situation or situations brought about by the words or actions of others. A sense of itself is what the poem sponsors, and not a sense of the world. It invents itself: its own necessity or urgency, its tone, its mixture of meaning and sound are in the poet's voice. It is in such isolation that it engenders its authority.

The degree to which a poem is explained or paraphrased is precisely the degree to which it ceases being a poem. If nothing is left of the poem, it has become a paraphrase of itself, and readers will experience the paraphrase in place of the poem. It is for this reason that poems must exist not only in language but beyond it.

Most poets, I think, are drawn to the unknown, and writing, for them, is a way of making the unknown visible.

In discussing his poem "The Old Woman and the Statue," Wallace Stevens said: "While there is nothing automatic about the poem, nevertheless it has an automatic aspect in the sense that it is what I wanted it to be without knowing

before it was written what I wanted it to be, even though before I knew it was written what I wanted to do.” This is as precise a statement of what is referred to as “the creative process” as I have ever read. And I think it makes clear why discussions of craft are at best precarious. We know only afterwards what it is we have done.

I’ve declared [that I’ve stopped writing poetry], I’m ashamed to say, a number of times. I get tired of it. I feel drained by it. I need time to recoup my energies. I am not a poetry writing machine. It’s not a reflex. It’s not an automatic thing with me. I have to feel I’m in that world. After I’d finished “Man and Camel” I felt drained. I felt I’d run out of gas and this happens periodically to me, which makes me think I’m not a natural poet. Some people just keep writing and writing and never seem to run out of ideas or energy or desire. I write few poems. I work rather hard on them, that is, it takes me a while to finish a poem. I do many drafts, sometimes as many as thirty or forty. I don’t trust my first, or second or third draft. Maybe it’s a little over dramatic to say I’ve run out of gas. I just think my interest flags. When I was younger, I felt if I wasn’t publishing, I didn’t exist. I don’t feel that any more. I become a little less interested in my poems. Sometimes, I think I’m beginning to repeat myself, and it’s time to stop and do something else. What I have usually done in the past is take an enormously long hiatus, as in 1980-1990 - although in 1985 I started writing poems again. But during those five years I wrote a book of stories, many magazines articles, three children books, three art books - the Hopper book, a book on William Bailey, a book called “Art of the Real” about the first generation American figurative painters after Abstract Expressionism. I was busy. I broke the spell of not writing poems and going back to poetry when I read Robert Fitzgerald’s masterful translation of “The Iliad.” I felt inspired to say the least. I started writing right away.

I’ve wanted to leave New York. I don’t feel I’m as productive as I might be elsewhere. I think New York is an assaultive city - one leads a reactive life much more than, let’s say, a meditative life. It is very hard to cut yourself off or shut yourself away in New York. Also, I didn’t want to teach forever and I thought I should retire. So falling in love, retiring, being tired of New York, all conspired to make the move to Madrid a possibility.

I’m ready to take a chance. I felt I was walking the same streets, beginning to think the same thoughts. My life became a convention unto itself. I thought I should shake it up a bit. Live in another language, live in another city, live in a different way. I could go through the motions of being Mark Strand in New York and not really be interested in my life - just sort of coast along in it. But the move has made me much more engaged in my experience. I really do look around me when I’m in Madrid. I do want to study the subway system. I want to improve my

Spanish. I'm going to relinquish basketball and become a fútbol fan.

I know I am going to finish a memoir [in Madrid]. I worked on it a little over two years ago and I'm going back to it. Almost Invisible suddenly inserted itself and claimed my attention, although I wrote it quickly - in a matter of eight months - which is unusual for me. I sort of stopped thinking about the memoir, and I also started doing collages and I've done a lot of them. It's almost like a reversion to childhood. I make my paper with the help of a master papermaker and I color it the way I want it colored, and control the thinness or heaviness. Then I begin to play, tearing it and cutting it and arranging the pieces into these little collages. I put them in a box. Most of them are now in Madrid - I don't know what will happen to them, although my French publisher, Vif Éditions, is doing a book of twenty of them. They are a small publisher but they do very beautiful books. They are publishing my poetry and my Hopper book in a big format, art book size - and this little book of my collages for which I have written an interview with myself.

As you become older, you become less present. You feel that the world is going along very well without you. And I'm fine with it.

Others:

[Strand's] poetry is situated on a volatile fault-line between what we accept as reality and what is just beyond our grasp. As a result, his poetry is remarkably serene with the promise, always the promise, of impending fury and disintegration. – Ernie Hilbert,
www.randomhouse.com/boldtype/0200/strand/interview.html, 2000

In *The Untelling*, perhaps Strand's most famous poem, the poet-speaker recalls a scene from his childhood at a lake, telling, retelling, and eventually *untelling* the story with an awareness of the interplay between memory and reality, between the perceptions of a child and the reminiscences of an adult.

Most critics see absence and negation as the characteristic images of Strand's poetry.

Strand employs absence as a hedge against mortality, since within many of his poems, when absence cracks, mortality gets a foothold. - Linda Gregerson,
Parnasus: Poetry in Review, 1981

Although Strand's speaker often defines himself through negatives and absences, the final result is that the very act of self-negation becomes celebratory of his

existence. - Samuel Maio, *Creating Another Self: Voice in Modern American Personal Poetry*, 1995

After *Selected Poems* came out in 1980, Strand hit something of a wall. *I gave up [writing poems] that year. . . . I didn't like what I was writing, I didn't believe in my autobiographical poems.* He began to concentrate on journalism and art criticism. He wrote the sweetly freakish comedies collected in *Mr. and Mrs. Baby and Other Stories* (1985), which featured the likes of Glover Bartlett, who reveals to his wife that he used to be a collie, or the nameless narrator who's certain his father has returned to life as a fly, then as a horse, and finally as his girlfriend. In settings that ranged from contemporary Southern California to the Arcadia of Greek myth, Strand explored new approaches to parody and satire and, in doing so, began to work himself free of what he felt were the imaginative and stylistic limitations of dramatic self-regard. *And then, he says, in 1985, I read Robert Fitzgerald's translation of "The Aeneid." I decided I'd try a poem, and I wrote "Cento Virgilianus," and I was off and running.*

Mark Strand's attitude toward his own writing is frank, unfussy, and wry. When he talks about himself, it's always with a sense of humor that underscores the absence of solemnity in his seriousness. *Reasons for Moving* (1968) and *Darker* (1970) gained him a national reputation as a poet. The disturbing power of their dark conundrums stemmed from the vividness of their comically incongruous details. The tenor of his work shifted in *The Story of Our Lives* (1973). Reflecting *an emotionally strenuous period*, its poems *were more ambitious, longer, and involved than any I had written*, as he said at the time. Highly rhetorical, they sought to express sorrow in elevated, passionate terms. *The Late Hour* followed in 1978, its poems *shorter and more lively*, containing *more of the world in them and less of myself*. - Jonathan Aaron, *Ploughshares*, Winter, 1995-96

If Strand is drawn to the ineffable, he is amused by the profane: the declining body, bureaucracy, sex, folly, the diminishing mind. . . . Strand may be the most successful American [poet] at bringing inklings of Kafka's DNA into verse. - Joel Whitney, *NPR*, 2012

Strand's poems occupy a place that exists between abstraction and the sensuous particulars of experience.

Mark Strand's poems, like John Ashbery's, can be read with great and almost dreamy pleasure. . . . - John Bayley, *The New York Review of Books*, 1998

Mark Strand has developed over the years an aesthetic much his own: the discursive, easy surfaces of his quiet, gently surreal poems accumulate into a

complex metaphysic, a notion of time and space that permeates his every utterance, whether abstract or concrete. And his poems teem with simple actions and things: a dog barks, a snowflake melts, a ship sails.

Strand doesn't approach the universal through the particular. He approaches the universal through the universal. - Deborah Garrison, *The New York Times Book Review*, 1998

It is there, in the time between times, the liminal spaces, that Strand's poetry exists. People always mention Wallace Stevens as Strand's significant predecessor, and he is certainly a student of the Stevens who saw in the whirling snow *the nothing that is not there and the nothing that is* - a scene that, of course, his blizzard of one recalls. This feeling for absences that become presences even seeps into his manner of address: the *you* in the armchair doesn't refer to a specific person whose situation in the world we can identify; the speakers and addressees in most of Strand's poems are meant to be archetypal. There is something removed about his approach, and it's easy to be put off by the way that each of his poems announces itself as a *Poem*, smoothly polished and free of the thorny personal quirks that both mar and enhance other poetic voices. But, to Strand's credit, his omniscient pride goes only so far. One of the most interesting things about his work is what meets his Olympian searchlight when it sweeps across the plains: an essentially godless vista. His poems have always evoked a universe that returns our eager gaze with a blank stare - the barren stretches of road where the farmer and his wife see *the small puffs of their breath . . . carried away* or the allegorical hill he described in a 1970 poem, which a person climbs and climbs, arriving nowhere. Almost 30 years later, he is still confronting the blankness; in a new poem called *The Next Time* he writes: *And no voice comes from outer space, from the folds / Of dust and carpets of wind to tell us that this / Is the way it was meant to happen. . . .*

Strand rarely reaches for an esoteric word; his apparently simple lines have the eerie, seductive ring of the inevitable.

Strand sets the purity of his language against the dusty, purposeless vagueness of so much of life - indeed, against the specter of death, which is often his true subject.

The poems tell one story and one story only: they narrate the moment when Strand makes Rimbaud's discovery, that *je est un autre*, that the self is someone else, even something else; *The Mailman*, *The Accident*, *The Door*, *The Tunnel*, even *The Last Bus* with its exotic Brazilian stage-properties, all recount the worst, realizing every *apprehension*, relishing the things possible only in one's wildest

fantasies of victimization, and then with a shriek as much of delight as of despair, fall upon *the fact* -

*It will always be this way.
I stand here scared
that you will disappear,
scared that you will stay -*

that the victimizer is, precisely, the self, and that the victim is the other, is others.

Strand is both nervous and morbid, and a consideration of finality is his constant project, sustained here by shifting the responsibility for the imminent wreck from *the reaches of ourselves* to the ambiguity instinct in *language*.

Strand's ability to capture such *spectral glimpses* is his singular contribution as a poet and is finally what earns him his place in the pantheon. Sometimes his abstractions, his way of seeming at once self-effacing and egotistical, can be frustrating - the language itself starts to feel generic, or grandly indifferent to our reaction. And yet when the chemistry works we experience a bizarre kind of reverse clarity.

Strand's work since *Reason for Moving* widens his scope, even as it sharpens his focus; just as he had divided his body against itself in order to discover an identity, he now identifies the body politic with his own in order to recover a division; in a series of political prospects, *Our Death*, *From a Litany*, *General*, and finest of all *The Way It Is*, the poet conjugates the nightmares of Fortress America with his own stunned mortality to produce an apocalypse of disordered devotion:

*Everyone who has sold himself wants to buy himself back.
Nothing is done. The night
eats into their limbs
like a blight.
Everything dims.
The future is not what it used to be.
The graves are ready. The dead
shall inherit the dead.*

But what gives these public accents of Strand's their apprehensive relevance is not just a shrewd selection of details (*My neighbor marches in his room, / wearing the sleek / mask of a hawk with a large beak . . . His helmet in a shopping bag, / he sits in the park, waving a small American flag*), nor any cozy contrast of the poet's *intimeries* against a gaining outer darkness (*Slowly I dance out of the burning house of my head. / And who isn't borne again and again into heaven?*).

Rather it is the sense that public and private degradation, outer and inner weather, tropic and glacial decors (Saint Thomas and Prince Edward Islands, in fact) are all versions and visions of what Coleridge called the *One Life*, and that the whole of nature and society are no more than the churning content of a single and limitless human body - the poet's own. - Richard Howard, *Alone With America: Essay on the Art of Poetry in the United States since 1950*, 1980

The resulting self-effacing voice aids Strand in his personal inquiry into the constitution, the definition, of an individual in a contemporary world to which he feels no relationship or role other than that of filling a void. Such an inquiry - and tentative answers - could not have been effected without his use of the self-effacing voice, for, as we have seen, this voice cannot be distinguished from the self portrayed - and defined - in these poems, whoever it is Strand would have us believe is their author. - Samuel Maio, *Creating Another Self: Voice in Modern American Personal Poetry*, 1995

In his short collection of idiosyncratic musings in verse form, *The Sargeantville Notebook* (1973), Strand included the following curious statement:

*The ultimate self-effacement
is not the pretense of the minimal,
but the jocular considerations of the maximal
in the manner of Wallace Stevens.*

Strand admittedly has long admired Stevens's work, and read Stevens even before beginning to write his own poetry. (He once remarked to Wayne Dodd: *I discovered I wasn't destined to be a very good painter, so I became a poet. Now it didn't happen suddenly. I did read a lot, and I had been a reader of poetry before. In fact, I was much more given to reading poems than I was to fiction and the book that I read a lot, and frequently, was The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens.*) Perhaps Strand, in commenting on what constitutes the *ultimate self-effacement*, regards Stevens as a belated Romantic poet, as does Harold Bloom, in that the ostensibly private reflection, which is the subject of the poem, expresses emotions or ideologies that are in fact diffuse. I make this parallel by suggesting that Strand means *the minimal* to be the private, or individual, concern so that a pretense of such occurs when a poet argues for his own life experiences as reflective of a larger than personal theme, and that his phrase *the jocular considerations of the maximal* means the viewing of global concerns with some degree of wit, with a touch of the absurd. A poet betrays his *pretense of the minimal* when he tries to be an impartial observer, a chronicler of an event he has witnessed or of a landscape he has seen; his presence in the poem - his personal *I* speaker - negates his intended impartiality, or objectivity, towards his subject. . . . Strand reads Stevens, however, as having successfully avoided such pretense by

constructing poems that begin about another's concerns, then move outward to embrace universal questions: *Peter Quince at the Clavier*, *Le Monocle de Mon Oncle*, and *The Paltry Nude Starts on a Spring Voyage* are a few examples from his early work. These jocular titles lead us to poems of *maximal* subject matter; in each, Stevens's presence is not visible. Each poem concentrates on the individual named in its title; consequently, Stevens's discussion of universal matters is filtered through his representation of these paltry and jocular characters. Yet these poems of Stevens employ a particular individual - Peter Quince, the *Oncle*, the Nude - (and none acting as a persona) in order to achieve his measure of self-effacement. In this sense, these figures are like *dramatis personae*. Yet Strand's objective is to achieve the same extent of impartiality, and impersonality, while using an *I* speaker that is neither a persona (that is, a representative *I* speaking in behalf of all) nor one that is entirely confessional.

The irreality of Borges, though still near, is receding in *Darker*, as Strand opens himself more to his own vision. These poems instantly touch a universal anguish as no *confessional* poems can, for Strand has the fortune of writing naturally and almost simply (though this must be supreme artifice) out of the involuntary near solipsism that always marks a central poetic imagination in America. An uncanny master of tone, Strand cannot pause for mere wit or argument but generally moves directly to phantasmagoria, a mode so magically disciplined in him as to make redundant for us almost all current questers after the *deep image*. - Harold Bloom, *Southern Review*, 1972

When Mark Strand reinvented the poem, he began by leaving out the world. The self he invented to star in the poems went on with the work of divestment: it jettisoned place, it jettisoned fellows, it jettisoned all distinguishing physical marks, save beauty alone. It was never impeded by personality. Nor was this radical renunciation to be confused with modesty, or asceticism. The self had designs on a readership, and a consummate gift for the musical phrase. - Linda Gregerson, *Parnassus: Poetry in Review*, 1981

Mark Strand has stopped writing poetry. Again. The first time he quit, the hiatus lasted five years, and, Strand says, it was agony. This time, *I have nothing left to say*, he explains. Strand, 77, a professor of English and comparative literature at Columbia University, has instead returned to his first love: art; he is creating a series of collages. He is also writing short, fun prose pieces and a memoir about his parents. He still gives talks about his poetry all over the world, including in Jerusalem in May. I heard him read his poetry in Madrid, Spain, in the summer of 2010. I then interviewed him twice in New York City, once in October 2010 and again in February 2011. - Bridget Kavane, *Tablet Magazine*, 2011

His new book of poems - *Almost Invisible* - seems to reflect his state of being,

concerned with the human condition, mortality, *the enigma of the infinitesimal* and that *beautiful place . . . [almost invisible] . . . the luminous conjunction of nothing and all*. This book is filled with fable and humor. Its wit and irony are enthralling, its pursuit of a certain beauty intoxicating. And never far is a looming nostalgia, a promising or unpromising melancholy.

Despite all his publications and accolades, the visual arts spark the greatest fervor in him. He has started doing collages again and has been rather productive in his output. But he has much else going on in his life. At seventy-seven, he has found love, retired as a professor at Columbia University, and just published a new collection, *Almost Invisible*. He wants to shake up his life, and says that he is ready for *harmony in the boudoir*. So he has decided to take a chance and leave New York for Madrid, where he's more fascinated by who's waiting for him on Calle del Marqués de Riscal, the street where he'll soon reside, than the luminous streets of the Spanish capital. - Nathalie Handal, *Guernica*, 2012

Selected Poems

Keeping Things Whole

In a field
I am the absence of field.
This is
always the case.
Wherever I am
I am what is missing.
When I walk
I part the air
and always
the air moves in
to fill the spaces
where my body's been.
We all have reasons
for moving.
I move
to keep things whole.
1964

Eating Poetry

Ink runs from the corners of my mouth.
There is no happiness like mine.
I have been eating poetry.

The librarian does not believe what she sees.
Her eyes are sad
and she walks with her hands in her dress.

The poems are gone.
The light is dim.
The dogs are on the basement stairs and coming up.

Their eyeballs roll,
their blond legs burn like brush.
The poor librarian begins to stamp her feet and weep.

She does not understand.
When I get on my knees and lick her hand,
she screams.

I am a new man.
I snarl at her and bark.
I romp with joy in the bookish dark.
1968

Letter

Men are running across a field,
pens fall from their pockets.
People out walking will pick them up.
It is one of the ways letters are written.
How things fall to others!
The self no longer belonging to me, but asleep
in a stranger's shadow, now clothing
the stranger, now leading him off.
It is noon as I write to you.
Someone's life has come into my hands.
The sun whitens the buildings.
It is all I have. I give it all to you. Yours,
1970

The New Poetry Handbook

1 If a man understands a poem,
he shall have troubles.

2 If a man lives with a poem,

he shall die lonely.

3 If a man lives with two poems,
he shall be unfaithful to one.

4 If a man conceives of a poem,
he shall have one less child.

5 If a man conceives of two poems,
he shall have two children less.

6 If a man wears a crown on his head as he writes,
he shall be found out.

7 If a man wears no crown on his head as he writes,
he shall deceive no one but himself.

8 If a man gets angry at a poem,
he shall be scorned by men.

9 If a man continues to be angry at a poem,
he shall be scorned by women.

10 If a man publicly denounces poetry,
his shoes will fill with urine.

11 If a man gives up poetry for power,
he shall have lots of power.

12 If a man brags about his poems,
he shall be loved by fools.

13 If a man brags about his poems and loves fools,
he shall write no more.

14 If a man craves attention because of his poems,
he shall be like a jackass in moonlight.

15 If a man writes a poem and praises the poem of a fellow,
he shall have a beautiful mistress.

16 If a man writes a poem and praises the poem of a fellow overly,
he shall drive his mistress away.

17 If a man claims the poem of another,
his heart shall double in size.

18 If a man lets his poems go naked,
he shall fear death.

19 If a man fears death,
he shall be saved by his poems.

20 If a man does not fear death,
he may or may not be saved by his poems.

21 If a man finishes a poem,
he shall bathe in the blank wake of his passion
and be kissed by white paper.
1970

Nostalgia

The professors of English have taken their gowns
to the laundry, have taken themselves to the fields.
Dreams of motion circle the Persian rug in a room you were in.
On the beach the sadness of gramophones
deepens the ocean's folding and falling.
It is yesterday. It is still yesterday.
1970

The Continuous Life

What of the neighborhood homes awash
In a silver light, of children hunched in the bushes,
Watching the grown-ups for signs of surrender,
Signs that the irregular pleasures of moving
From day to day, of being adrift on the swell of duty,
Have run their course? O parents, confess
To your little ones the night is a long way off
And your taste for the mundane grows; tell them
Your worship of household chores has barely begun;
Describe the beauty of shovels and rakes, brooms and mops;
Say there will always be cooking and cleaning to do,
That one thing leads to another, which leads to another;
Explain that you live between two great darks, the first
With an ending, the second without one, that the luckiest

Thing is having been born, that you live in a blur
Of hours and days, months and years, and believe
It has meaning, despite the occasional fear
You are slipping away with nothing completed, nothing
To prove you existed. Tell the children to come inside,
That your search goes on for something you lost—a name,
A family album that fell from its own small matter
Into another, a piece of the dark that might have been yours,
You don't really know. Say that each of you tries
To keep busy, learning to lean down close and hear
The careless breathing of earth and feel its available
Languor come over you, wave after wave, sending
Small tremors of love through your brief,
Undeniable selves, into your days, and beyond.
1994

The Great Poet Returns

When the light poured down through the holes in the clouds,
We knew the great poet was going to show. And he did
A limousine with all white tires and stained-glass windows
Dropped him off. And then, with a clear and soundless fluency,
He strode into the hall. There was a hush. His wings were big.
The cut of his suit, the width of his tie, were out of date.
When he spoke, the air seemed whitened by imagined cries.
The worm of desire bore into the heart of everyone there.
There were tears in their eyes. The great one was better than ever.
“No need to rush”, he said at the close of the reading, ”the end
Of the world is only the end of the world as you know it.”
How like him, everyone thought. Then he was gone,
And the world was a blank. It was cold and the air was still.
Tell me, you people out there, what is poetry anyway?
Can anyone die without even a little?
1995

A Piece of the Storm

From the shadow of domes in the city of domes,
A snowflake, a blizzard of one, weightless, entered your room
And made its way to the arm of the chair where you, looking up
From your book, saw it the moment it landed. That's all
There was to it. No more than a solemn waking
To brevity, to the lifting and falling away of attention, swiftly,

A time between times, a flowerless funeral. No more than that
Except for the feeling that this piece of the storm,
Which turned into nothing before your eyes, would come back,
That someone years hence, sitting as you are now, might say:
“It’s time. The air is ready. The sky has an opening.”

1998

The Night, the Porch

To stare at nothing is to learn by heart
What all of us will be swept into, and baring oneself
To the wind is feeling the ungraspable somewhere close by.
Trees can sway or be still. Day or night can be what they wish.
What we desire, more than a season or weather, is the comfort
Of being strangers, at least to ourselves. This is the crux
Of the matter. Even now we seem to be waiting for something
Whose appearance would be its vanishing—the sound, say,
Of a few leaves falling, or just one leaf, or less.
There is no end to what we can learn. The book out there
Tells as much, and was never written with us in mind.

1998

Man and Camel

On the eve of my fortieth birthday
I sat on the porch having a smoke
when out of the blue a man and a camel
happened by. Neither uttered a sound
at first, but as they drifted up the street
and out of town the two of them began to sing.
Yet what they sang is still a mystery to me -
the words were indistinct and the tune
too ornamental to recall. Into the desert
they went and as they went their voices
rose as one above the sifting sound
of windblown sand. The wonder of their singing,
its elusive blend of man and camel, seemed
an ideal image for all uncommon couples.
Was this the night that I had waited for
so long? I wanted to believe it was,
but just as they were vanishing, the man
and camel ceased to sing, and galloped
back to town. They stood before my porch,

staring up at me with beady eyes, and said:
"You ruined it. You ruined it forever."

2006

Like a Leaf Carried Off by the Wind

After leaving work, where he is not known and where his job is a mystery even to himself, he walks down dimly lit streets and dark alleys to his room at the other end of town in the rear of a rundown apartment house. It is winter and he walks hunched over with the collar of his coat turned up. When he gets to his room, he sits at a small table and looks at the book open before him. Its pages are blank, which is why he is able to gaze at them for hours.

2012

When I Turned a Hundred

I wanted to go on an immense journey, to travel night and day into the unknown until, forgetting my old self, I came into possession of a new self, one that I might have missed on my previous travels. But the first step was beyond me. I lay in bed, unable to move, pondering, as one does at my age, the ways of melancholy - how it seeps into the spirit, how it disincarnates the will, how it banishes the senses to the chill of twilight, how even the best and worst intentions wither in its keep. I kept staring at the ceiling, then suddenly felt a blast of cold air, and I was gone.

2012

